

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Fiber Optic Utility New Easement Application
Proposed Implementation Date:	May 2022
Proponent:	Triangle Communications Assn, Inc
Location:	NE¼, W½SW¼, & SE¼SW¼ of Section 16, Township 3 South, Range 13 East (Common Schools Trust) – Sweet Grass County
County:	Sweet Grass County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The Proponent, Triangle Communications Assn, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) proposing to replace existing underground telecommunications facilities and upgrade the current copper telephone lines to fiber optic lines in Section 16 of Township 2 South, Range 13 East in Sweet Grass County. The proposed easement runs with in the right-of-way of the East Boulder Road which is a county/public road and will encumber ±2.70-acres of State Trust Land (see Exhibit A). The county has not secured an easement for the road.

Triangle Communications was previously granted a 20' easement (D-7279) in 2002 running along the east portion of East Boulder Road. The proponent is seeking out a new right-of-way along the western side of the public roadway way as it is the most direct and efficient path to provide utility services. They will leave the copper line and D-7279 in place as a redundancy in case of emergencies and will obtain a new easement for installing a fiber optic line in a new corridor on the western side of the East Boulder Road.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

No formal public scoping was performed by DNRC for this proposed project. Triangle Communications obtained a Settlement of Damages form from the grazing lessee.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

The proponent is seeking the following required permits in relation to this project:

- 310 Permit – Sweet Grass Conservation District
- Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) – MT DEQ
- USDA Forest Service Special Use Permit

All permits will be secured before construction on this project can commence.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue a new 20' wide easement to Triangle Communications for the underground installation telecommunications utilities across the State Trust Land on Section 16, Township 3 South, Range 13 East in Sweet Grass County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the new 20' wide easement Triangle Communications for the underground installation telecommunications utilities across the State Trust Land on Section 16, Township 3 South, Range 13 East in Sweet Grass County and keep the current Right-of-Way for a buried copper telephone cable.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The majority land cover of the parcel in the proposed alternative is considered mainly Montane Grassland for the Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill, and Valley Grasslands and Rocky Mountain Subalpine-Montana Mesic Meadow. The other portions are considered Big Sagebrush Steppe and Rocky Mountain Lower Montane-Foothill Riparian Woodland and Shrubland. According to the NRCS Soil Survey, the area consists of Shambo loam and Winspect cobbly loams with slopes ranging from 4% to 35% in steeper area. These soils are relatively deep, fine textured with coarse fragments and are non-saline. The underlying geologic bed is comprised of Slide Mountain Volcanics, which are mainly igneous type rocks with some sedimentary rock layers.

The route proposed is generally located in the riparian areas, adjacent to a public road that has been previously disturbed. The fiber optic cable will be installed using a direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. Based on the proposed action and relatively short disturbance time for project, no significant adverse impacts to geology and soils are expected by implementing the proposed action.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

The proposed alternative's construction will be mainly within the riparian area of the East Boulder River and is adjacent to an existing road that follows the perennial streambed of the East Boulder River. The proposed easement will cross East Boulder River where a bridge extends over for road access. The proponent will attach to the bridge to avoid disturbances within the watershed of the East Boulder River and no disturbance will occur inside the drainage or streambed. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are anticipated by implementing the proposed action.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the equipment exhaust that is used to install the utilities. No significant adverse impacts to air quality are expected by implementing the proposed action.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The majority of work will be within the woodland and shrubland riparian area of the East Boulder River. The fiber optic cable is proposed to run adjacent to the East Boulder Road that has previously been disturbed. The proponent's fiber optic cable is to be installed using direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cables, covers said cables, and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless.

The proposed action area has previously been disturbed but there could be short term impacts on vegetation. During construction the proponent will take care to make minimal impacts to the vegetation. Upon completion of the work, they will re-seed the disturbed area with a native grass mix. The proponent has secured a lessee settlement form from the lessee. No significant long-term adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

A variety of big game (deer, elk, grizzly bears, and mountain lions), small mammals, raptors, and songbirds traverse the subject sections. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns while construction is scheduled to occur. Due to the relatively short project duration and nature no significant adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated the following species of concern have been observed with the general area:

- **Grizzly Bear** (*Ursus arctos*), **Wolverine** (*Gulo gulo*)
- **Golden Eagle** (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

Bat Roosts (Non-cave) have been discovered in the area. There are also potential species of concern that have the possibility of having habitats or being observed in the surrounding area.

While these species may be present in the general project area, no direct or lasting impacts are expected to occur to sensitive species. Due to the short duration and minimal disturbance, the project will have minimal impact to the environment and habitat on State Land.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

The following cultural and paleontological surveys have been previously performed:

- 1996 – 1996-5-3 – None Identified
- 2001 – 2001-5-1 – None Identified
- 2001 – 2001-5-7
 - 24SW0717 – Rock Structures
 - 24SW0721 – Historic Building Foundation
 - 24SW0713 – Rock Alignments
 - 24SW0716 – Rock Alignments
 - 24SW0725 – Irrigation System
 - 24SW0734 – Rock Structures
 - 24SW0735 – Rock Structures
 - 24SW0726 – Historic Campsite
 - 24SW0731 – Cairns

None of the identified historical and archaeological sites discovered are within the proposed area impacted by the proposed alternative. The impacted area is adjacent to a county road that has previously been disturbed.

A Class I (literature review) level review was conducted by the DNRC staff archaeologist for the area of potential effect (APE). This entailed inspection of project maps, DNRC's sites/site leads database, land use records, General Land Office Survey Plats, and control cards. The Class I search revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the project APE. No additional archaeological investigative work will be conducted in response to this proposed development. However, if previously unknown cultural or

paleontological materials are identified during project related activities, all work will cease until a professional assessment of such resources can be made.

The proposed project will have *No Effect* to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. Formal reports of findings are available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed action would result in the installation of a fiber optic cable adjacent and parallel to established public road right-of-way. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the installation disturbance, the only indication that there is a fiber optic line would be from any above-ground warning markers. No significant adverse impact to aesthetics is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

No other projects are known on this portion of state-owned land at this time

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>RESOURCES</i> potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.• Explain <i>POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS</i> following each resource heading.• Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The proponents have submitted lessee settlement forms and the proposed area is not suited for cropland. The fiber optic line will provide updated telecommunication services to rural residences as well at the Stillwater Mining company. Due to the short nature of the project and minimal disturbance, no significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action will have no significant impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The proposed action will have no adverse impact on tax revenue.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

The implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

The proposed project will have no long-term effect on access to and quality of recreational and wilderness activities.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

No significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The Common Schools Trust will benefit by getting a one-time fee of \$8,100.00.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Joe Holzwarth	Date: 31 January 2022
	Title: Area Planner, Southern Land Office	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that a permanent 20' easement, containing ± 2.70 -acres, be granted to Triangle Communications for the purpose of installing underground fiber optic cable on the following Trust land parcel of Section 16, Township 3 South, Range 13 East in Sweet Grass County

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust lands listed above are minimal due to the nature of the proposed action which would entail the issuing of the easement and installation of underground fiber optic cable. The installation and disturbance are expected to be completed in a short time-frame. Additionally, the easement is located adjacent and parallel to an existing public roadway. There are no natural features that could produce adverse impacts or species of concern occupying the parcels that are expected to be impacted by implementing the proposed action.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

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EIS

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More Detailed EA

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No Further Analysis

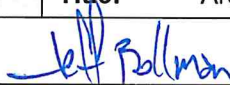
EA Checklist Approved By:	Name:	Jeff Bollman
	Title:	Area Manager, Southern Land Office
Signature: 		Date: 2/24/2022

Exhibit A – Easement Amendment Location

